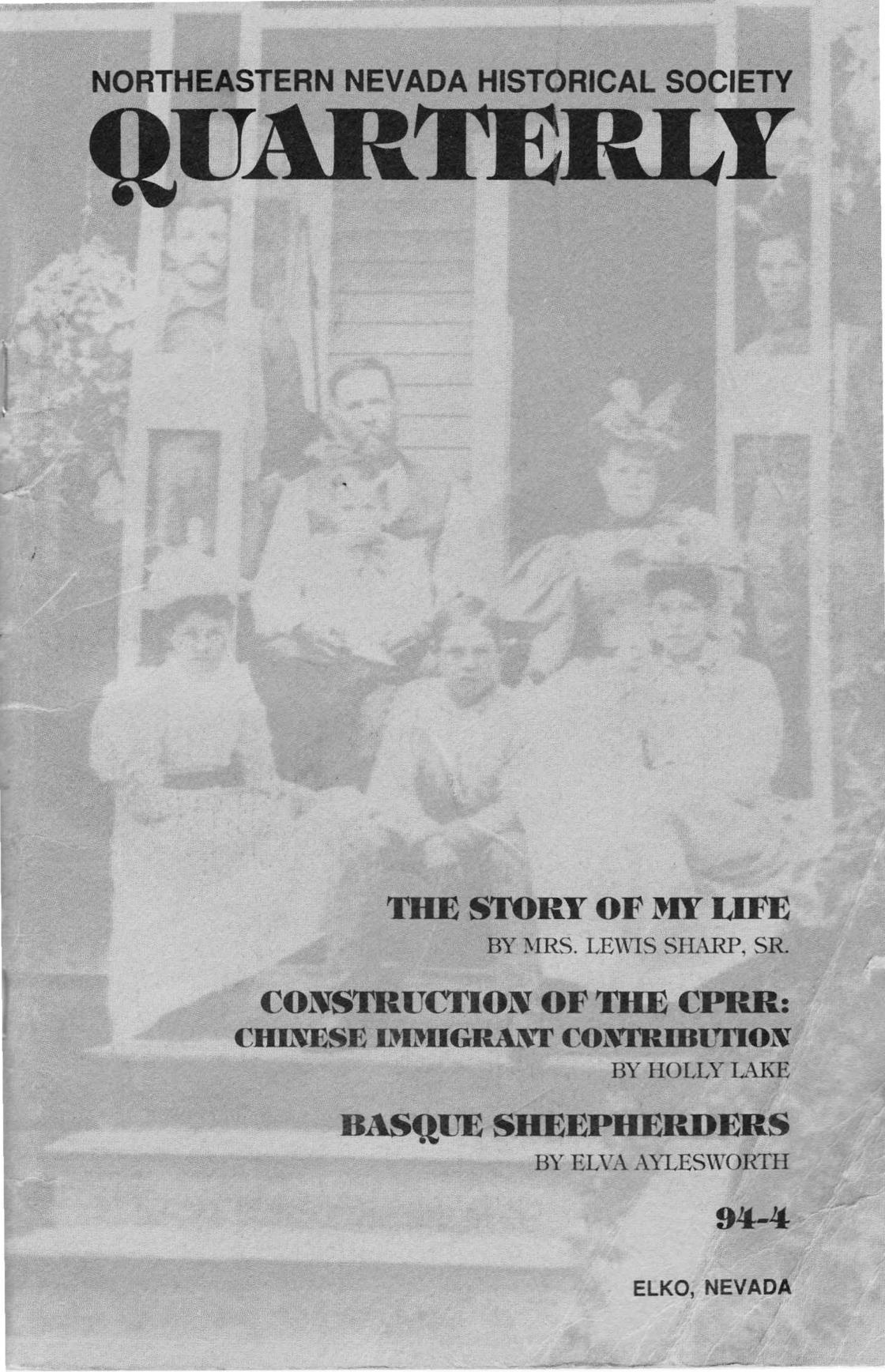


NORTHEASTERN NEVADA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

# QUARTERLY



**THE STORY OF MY LIFE**

BY MRS. LEWIS SHARP, SR.

**CONSTRUCTION OF THE CPRR:  
CHINESE IMMIGRANT CONTRIBUTION**

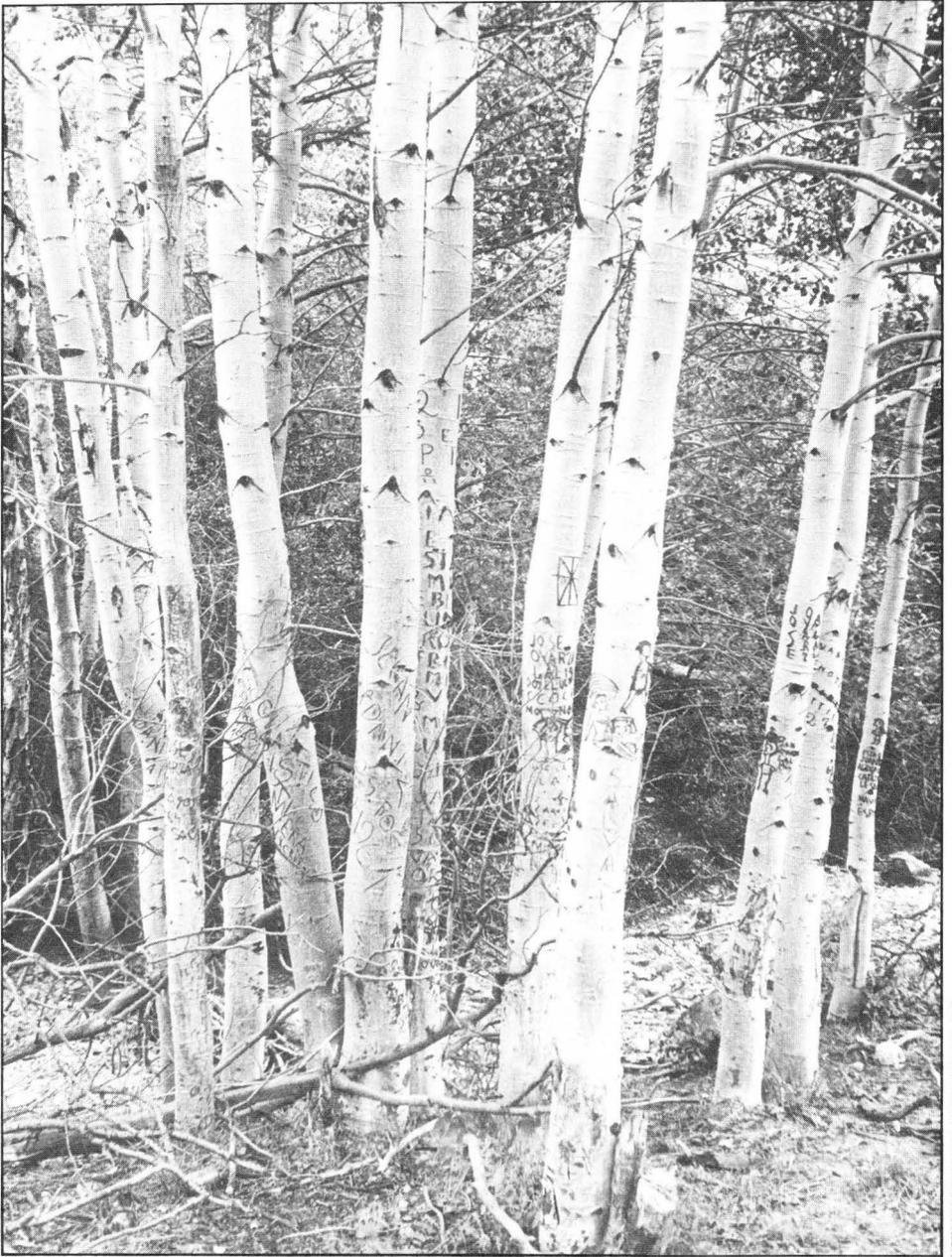
BY HOLLY LAKE

**BASQUE SHEEPHERDERS**

BY ELVA AYLESWORTH

**94-4**

ELKO, NEVADA



Dr. Richard Lane - museum collection

*Basque tree carvings located high in the mountains of Elko County.*

# BASQUE SHEEPHERDERS

BY ELVA AYLESWORTH

Over 100 years ago, the Basques began immigrating from Spain and France to this country. Their determination, ability to work hard, desire to succeed, and willingness to sacrifice in order to attain tomorrow's security, are the major strengths that enabled the Basque people to immigrate to and succeed in America. They saw this new land with its sparsely inhabited West and possible business opportunities as the land of dreams, a place of future financial security.<sup>1</sup> For some, the hope of financial security was fulfilled in the new land of America and some were able to enjoy their success back in the old country. For many, the strong determination that enabled them to endure the sacrifice and hardship of life in the American West was accompanied by a pain that lingers today.

Land was scarce in the Basque countries; therefore, to stay meant living and working in the cities. Basque culture taught that rural life was one of "personal dignity and independence," a way of life to be treasured; whereas life for the city worker was one of hard work under someone else's direction. In Basque society, the eagerness to do hard work is greatly respected. However, the Basques prefer to work for themselves only, even to the exclusion of working for other Basque people.<sup>2</sup> Continually being under another person's authority was seen as a loss of identity and independence.<sup>3</sup> America, a land where hard work and determination produced security and freedom, became a dream for many of the Basque people.

Trading their berets for hats, they journeyed to the United States,<sup>4</sup> leaving family, friends, homes, and culture. They left as teens<sup>5</sup> and some went back as old men, but almost all left parents, sisters, or brothers whom they would never see again. Close association with others has always been very important to the Basque people as they are a remarkably social society.<sup>6</sup> Leaving this society to take up the life of a solitary sheepherder often took more endurance than the average person has.

Due to a famine throughout the Basque country, political unrest, and lack of work opportunities, the Basques began immigrating into California in the 1850s.<sup>7</sup> The gold rush attracted them at first,<sup>8</sup> but the insecurity of the mining industry soon discouraged them. At this time, the Industrial Revolution in Europe caused an increase in the demand for wool, sheep tallow, and mutton, which required additional numbers in sheep and sheepherders.<sup>9</sup> The promise of \$25 to \$50 a month was attractive enough to entice many of the immigrant Basques to begin the solitary life of the sheepherder. Some of the Basques had herded sheep in Argentina,<sup>10</sup> and others had come from families which owned sheep. But for the most part, they learned their herding skills in the United States.

Fifty years prior to the Industrial Revolution, California's governor at the time, a Basque man named Diego de Borica, promoted the sheep industry by buying and distributing sheep on his own to various California ranches. During his term in office from 1794 to 1800, sheep numbers quadrupled, and by 1822, there were more than 200,000 head in the state.<sup>11</sup> By 1860, investing in the sheep business was the safest and most profitable venture possible, with a 100% profit per year.<sup>12</sup> This

opened the door for the hard working, success-oriented Basque immigrants. The large majority of native Californios were cattle ranchers who inherently had a very low conception of sheep, shying from the task of herding them, so the early sheepherders were of many different backgrounds, having been brought in from all over by the gold mines.<sup>13</sup> However, in *Los Angeles, City of Dreams*, Harry Carr wrote that by 1887, the Basques were in control of the sheep in California. He remarked, "Possibly no race with less fighting qualities could have held their own against the cattlemen..., the Basque herders and Mexican cattlemen shot on sight..."<sup>14</sup>

Cattlemen had been accustomed to uninhibited use of the public lands bordering their deeded ranches, and the arrival of the roving sheep operators was a rude awakening. Although the itinerant sheepmen were on public ground, cattle ranchers and land-owning sheepmen openly resented them.<sup>15</sup> The opportunity for future financial independence prompted many herders to take their wages in live sheep. This further increased the number of roaming sheepmen with no land base, who continued to crowd the land-owning ranchers. Friction between the landowners and the landless continued. William A Douglass wrote, in *Basque Sheepherders of the American West*, that the itinerant shepherd usually moved on after a confrontation with a cowboy about trespassing. Sometimes "tempers flared and reason was replaced by violence. More than one herder was roped and dragged behind a horse, just as more than one buckaroo fell to a herder's .30-30 rifle."<sup>16</sup> However, *Amerikanuak*, written by William A. Douglass and Jon Bilbao, states to the contrary: "The resort to serious violence was both rare and limited to the particularly hot-tempered."<sup>17</sup>

Along with the growth in sheep numbers and in the number of sheepherders came the expansion of crop farming, leaving little room for any of the ranchers or sheepmen to expand. In addition to that was the increasing hostility of the rancher and established sheepmen toward the "tramp" sheep operator. As a result of these numerous hindrances, the itinerant sheepmen began the hunt for new country.

Nevada winters being what they are, cold and risky for raising livestock, these traveling sheep outfits still preferred Nevada over the crush of the California ranges.<sup>18</sup> Beginning around 1870, sheep were trailed into Nevada until, by 1910, there were 1,154,795 sheep registered. Depending entirely on public ground, these early sheep operators trailed their bands to the southern dry areas in the winter, then back to the high mountain pasture for the summer. Some bands traveled up to 500 miles or more making their way from summer to winter ranges, than back again.<sup>19</sup> Sometimes as many as 10 bands in one outfit would travel together, grazing slowly along the way. Ten bands of sheep could number between 15,000 and 20,000 head, according to Sarah Bixby in *Adobe Days*.<sup>20</sup> Ten herders traveled with a herd this size, but when they were settled on their separate ranges, one herder and a couple of good sheepdogs could handle more than 1,000 head of sheep alone. Being of a nervous nature and vulnerable to attack from predators, sheep required constant care, to the point that sheepherders often slept on the ground with them.<sup>21</sup> The conscientious herder left nothing to chance in caring for his charges, as his reputation was on the line in the weight and number of the lambs at shipping time.<sup>22</sup>

Most herders slept on the ground, using sagebrush for a mattress. Immigrating from France at age 24, Mrs. Anna Hachquet has resided in Elko, Nevada, for the



M.P. Armstrong, museum collection

*Winter sheep camp for Elko County sheep being driven to winter range near Hamilton, Nevada.*

past 70 years. She is the widow of a successful sheepman and remembers from her days of cooking for her husband at the sheep camp, "You had to look every day in the bed for snakes, always you watch for snakes. Oh, yes, I remember that!" The snakes liked the cool familiarity of the sage, so even though it made a good mattress, it had to be checked often for visitors. Sixty-five years ago, Jean-Baptiste Ardans came to American to herd sheep. He recalls an experience of unknowingly sharing his bed with a rattlesnake. He had just gotten into bed when he heard it slither past his head. "Oh boy, I jumped! I was scared! I couldn't reach it the first time with my shovel." When he did connect, you can believe he made short work of that unwelcome guest.

All cooking was done in the open over a campfire, regardless of the weather. Bread that would put many housewives to shame, was cooked in a dutch oven in the ground. Frank Lespade, long-time employee of Elko Lumber Company and retired superintendent of maintenance for the Elko County School District, began sheepherding at 13 in the country around Currie, Nevada. He states that a fire was built in a hole dug in the ground. When the fire had burned down and there were plenty of coals, the Dutch oven containing the bread dough was placed down in the coals and left for a time. This browned the bread and gave it a crust. Next, the oven was completely covered with dirt for about an hour while the bread baked. Pete Amestoy, a herder for 25 years and well known for his bread-making skill, says this was much better than "town bread."

Herders today live in sheep wagons which have modern day luxuries, such as a bed, table, and cupboards. They do not, however, have electricity, plumbing, or refrigeration. The early sheepherder used a tent or teepee and made do. Transportation for the early herder was a burro or horse. Camp was moved on the back of a packhorse.<sup>23</sup> Pete Amestoy came to America when he was 17 to herd sheep. He has

been out of the sheep business for about 40 years, but clearly remembers the harshness of the sheep camp. "It was a terrible life, had tents and used jackasses. It's good now, with cars and trailers. Live like a king. It used to be nothing."

In the early days the camp tender would resupply the herders once or twice each month with beans, dried fruit, coffee, and ingredients for bread. When bands belonging to the same outfit were near each other, the herders would butcher one sheep together and share the meat, one animal being too much for one man before it spoiled.<sup>24</sup> In later years, camp tenders came every four to six days, bringing canned meat, fresh vegetables, pop, and wine along with the usual fare. Frequency of visits and extent of supplies varied from outfit to outfit. Frank Lespade tells of working with his dad for Pete Itcaina and being sent to Wells to pick up cases of moonshine. "I was pretty young, but I drove all the way over there by myself, then back to Pole Canyon (Ruby Valley) where we were camped." Jean Ardans, nephew of Pete Itcaina and employed by him for 24 years, laughs as he recalls the five-gallon containers they were supplied coffee in. He remarked, "It was good to haul water in after the coffee was gone."

Many sheepmen who employed the herders would hold back their wages for a year at a time. Some would hold these earnings until the herder quit, even if it was 25 years after he was hired. Pete Amestoy tells of working for several outfits and only staying a year or two at the longest at each. His answer as to why he moved around so much was: "Can't get paid! Shorter you stay, quicker you paid." Some herders, trusting years of wages to employer's keeping, lost all when the employer went bankrupt. Pete Itcaina was one of the many sheepmen who operated on the wages held back from the herders. He came to America some time before 1900, homesteaded a place between Deeth and Charleston, and became a very successful businessman by the time he sold out in 1951. Obviously, some of his success came from being able to forego paying wages to many employees for many years. He employed 15 herders, including two brothers and four nephews. Jean Ardans, one of the nephews, drew his first and last paycheck on the same day when he quit after 24 years of employment with Itcaina.

Physical danger was an everyday companion to the herders in the form of weather, predators, snakes, illness, and injury. The major problem, though, was psychological, living with the boredom and isolation from other humans.<sup>25</sup> Numerous herders were unable to deal with this facet of their occupation. Many quit. Others remember crying themselves to sleep. Some actually went crazy. The term "Crazy Basco" was not uncommon or without meaning. In early 1900, an organization in Boise was formed to supply the return fares for the mentally and physically ill immigrants.<sup>26</sup> Some of the Basque herders killed themselves if they felt they were going crazy. Others didn't "catch it" in time.<sup>27</sup> Archer B. Gilfillan, in his book, *Sheep*, claims that some think no one can herd sheep even six months and not go crazy, "while others maintain that a man must have been mentally unbalanced for at least six months before he is in fit condition to entertain the thought of herding."<sup>28</sup>

There were many herders who toughed it out, "putting in their time" for the monetary security they would realize after years of loneliness and danger. Unable to speak fluent English, or for most, any at all, town was not a preferred alternative. Conmen and prostitutes were only too ready to relieve the herder of his money.<sup>29</sup> There are as many stories as there were outfits. For the itinerant sheepman, traveling



*Early photograph of sheep shearing operation. Pete Elia is on the far right in white shirt.*

around with no home base, completely alone except for the short time he enjoyed visiting with the camp tender, the loneliness could be, and in many cases was, unbearable. Herders for some of the bigger outfits would pasture their band of sheep close to other bands belonging to the same outfit during the summer. This relieved some of the loneliness. For young Frank Lespade, who moved to a sheep camp at Currie from a Catholic boarding school in California, there were many adjustments to make. Living and working around 10 other herders, learning to herd sheep, handle a team of horses, ride a mule, and drink moonshine, Lespade doesn't recall loneliness as being one of his problems. He only remembers, "There was work to do and you did it." Pete Amestoy recollects a much different experience. He was alone most of the time and remembers the loneliness well. After 24 years of herding, Pete moved to town (Elko) and bought the Blue Jay, a bar he ran for 11 years. He then sold the bar and bought apartments instead. Now, looking back, Pete excitedly points out, "It was like being in jail! Can't go fishing!"

Throughout the western rangelands, generations of Basque sheepherders have left the mark of their passing by carving messages into plaques nailed to trees, the tree bark or even the handle of a scrub brush. Each year the message is added to with the date of their stay or just a short note: "This is a sad and bitter life." Another one notes, "No good camp." In the barren, treeless country, a rockpile was built. These were called *harrimutilak*, or "stone boys." This evidence for future herders of another's presence in this camp was one common way for these men to deal with the boredom and loneliness. It gave them a feeling of connection, knowing that other herders would some day see their message, and it was also encouraging to them to read the words of another who had been there before them.<sup>30</sup> But with the Basques' desire to work hard, live honestly, and be self-reliant, they eventually earned the respect of Americans<sup>31</sup> and were soon believed to be the best and the most dependable sheepherders.<sup>32</sup> Elko resident Loyd Sorensen owned and operated a



Dr. Richard Lane, museum collection

*Old sheep wagon at the Goicoechea Ranch at North Fork, 1970.*

sheep business for over 50 years. He hired many Basque shepherders and claims they are "honest and efficient workers. Efficient workers, that says it all." Another testimony to their integrity comes from a commonly held belief by the bankers that "The word of the Basque is as good as a written contract."<sup>33</sup> Mrs. Anna Hachquet recently discovered this is still considered true. Upon hearing that her favorite restaurant was no longer accepting personal checks, Hachquet questioned her waitress. She was asked: "Are you Basque?" When hearing the answer: "Yes," the waitress replied that she would take her check.

Of the various people who have herded sheep, the Basques were the most successful, due to their value of hard work, endurance, and staying with one occupation.<sup>34</sup> Other people tried herding for a short time, but only the Basque could see this path to financial security many years in the future. For most people, to say "shepherd" is to say "Basque." No other ethnic group has been related to any occupation so completely as the Basque to the herding of sheep.<sup>35</sup>

Beginning in 1862 and continuing until 1934, laws were continually being passed that hurt the sheepmen,<sup>36</sup> culminating in the Taylor Grazing Act (1934), which stopped the itinerant sheepmen from using public lands exclusively to produce their livestock. This also ended the opportunities for herders to start their own business<sup>37</sup> and, with the European economy improving, the Basques no longer desired to immigrate. The century-long period of the Basque shepherd had ceased.

When the Basques left their homeland, the intent was to stay only long enough to earn the capital required for the trip home and a business when they got there.<sup>34</sup> In the early days of the booming sheep industry and plentiful opportunities, many were able to go home within 10 years. Later on, the financial security they sought took longer to find.

A large majority of these immigrants left their country never to return. Money, or, for some, the willingness to spend it, is one reason.<sup>38</sup> For others, it is the emotional expense of a return to a home where many loved ones have passed on, and where "things are so different now." For many, the official arrangements necessary for such a trip and the language barrier that is still there must seem too much to deal with. Others still firmly state: "Next year, I'll go home next year."<sup>36</sup> For many, "next year" never comes.

After 40 or 50 years, a Basque herder may return to his homeland only to find that it is not the same place and that he is certainly not the same man. With a saddened but firm step, he turns back to the America that has claimed him.<sup>39</sup>

The percentage of success stories is small of the Basques returning to their homeland within a few short years after immigrating, as prospective businessmen happy to remain in the old country. However, as immigrants desiring to make something of themselves and be recognized in their new country as the honorable upright citizens that they are, the Basques have ultimately succeeded.

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Douglass, *Amerikanuak, Basques in the New World*, pg. 128.

<sup>2</sup>"Basques in the West," *Sunset Magazine*. June, 1976, pg. 64.

<sup>3</sup>Douglass, *Amerikanuak*, pg. 128.

<sup>4</sup>Laxalt, *Sweet Promised Land*, pg. 22.

<sup>5</sup>Douglass, *Amerikanuak*, pg. 263.

<sup>6</sup>"Basques in the West," pg. 64.

<sup>7</sup>Douglass, *Amerikanuak*, pg. 129.

<sup>8</sup>"Basques in the West," pg. 64.

<sup>9</sup>Douglass, *Amerikanuak*, pg. 139.

<sup>10</sup>"Basques in the West," pg. 64.

<sup>11</sup>Douglass, *Amerikanuak*, pg. 218.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, pg. 223.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, pg. 222.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, pg. 229.

<sup>15</sup>"Basques in the West," pg. 64.

<sup>16</sup>Douglass, *Basque Shepherders of the American West*, pg. 9.

<sup>17</sup>Douglass, *Amerikanuak*, pg. 276.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, pg. 248.

<sup>19</sup>Douglass, *Basque Shepherders*, pg. 6.

<sup>20</sup>Douglass, *Amerikanuak*, pg. 229.

<sup>21</sup>Frank Lespade interview.

<sup>22</sup>Douglass, *Basque Shepherders*, pg. 43.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, pg. 53.

<sup>24</sup>Lespade interview.

<sup>25</sup>Douglass, *Basque Shepherders*, pg. 59.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, pg. 29.

<sup>27</sup>Laxalt, *Sweet*, pg. 39.

<sup>28</sup>Douglass, *Amerikanuak*, pg. 298.

<sup>29</sup>Douglass, *Basque Shepherders*, pg. 101.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, pg. 7.

<sup>31</sup>Douglass, *Amerikanuak*, pg. 259.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, pg. 274.

<sup>33</sup>Douglass, *Basque Shepherders*, pg. 27.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, pg. 25.

<sup>35</sup>Douglass, *Amerikanuak*, pg. 289.

<sup>36</sup>"Basques in the West," pg. 64.

<sup>37</sup>Laxalt, *Sweet*, pg. 40.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, pg. 38.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, pg. 176.

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